

The Significance of the Triple Gem (The Threefold Refuge)

The triple gem, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, are concerned in Buddhism as refuge to overcome all kinds of sufferings of beings. The first refuge that the Buddha means the Buddha's enlightenment, the Dhamma illustrates the Buddha's teachings or doctrines, and the Sangha defines Buddha's noble disciples. Buddhists say these as the triple gem which are invaluable or priceless things in the world. That is why Buddhists wish kindly as "May the Triple Gem Bless You" when they meet a person. Buddhism invites intelligent beings to come and see this message. At the very beginning, when a person hopes to practice the Buddha's message to get rid of suffering and overcome all sorrow and lamentation, if he or she has some sort of confidence about these three things, it is easy to follow this teaching and get the results during this life itself. As much as this confidence increases, his all efforts that relate to liberation increase as well. It doesn't mean that someone needs this confidence for ever. Although we have the confidence about this path, when we practice it, after we get the result, further it doesn't need faith or confidence because we have a complete understanding and the visible results. Then we can see it through our life and no more confidence or faith is required because of our own comprehension.

This confidence that comes in Buddhism about the three refuges is not like a blind faith. The Buddha says to the world very clearly that anybody can ask and search about his enlightenment, his teachings and his noble disciples. That is why Buddhism never says "*to come and believe*", and Buddhism always says "*to come and see*". That is the main difference in Buddhism.

These three refuges give us the protection or security not for this physical body but for refuge in preventing from falling into the hell and suffering. That is the great protection which anybody has. This great benefit can't be received from any other power in the world. However, as the result of practicing good we are able to overcome many difficulties and problems which come to our physical body too. We can especially control some bad results which come from previous bad activities.

The Buddha :-

When we mention the Buddha as a refuge, we consider His enlightenment (*Saddhahati tathagatassa bodhim*). As an enlightened, awakened spiritual teacher, the Buddha is concerned that his understanding and discovery is true and if someone practices it, he or she can gain the result as much as he or she has effort. When the Buddha was alive, many people who listened to the Buddha's message said that "I go for refuge to the Lord Buddha". Therefore actually this is not a Buddha's declaration, but the Buddha's disciples' declaration. For an example, after listening to the Buddha's discourse, Brahmin Janussoni said that '*I am going to refuge to the Buddha. I resort to him, follow and honor him*'. If someone comes to practice this message or gets the results from this message, it is not

a benefit for Buddhism. It is a benefit to himself who comes because Buddhism is already highly appreciated by intelligent men, even deities and brahmas.

Especially we have to know here that we don't go for refuge to the Buddha's physical body. Here, we go for refuge to His enlightenment. We trust in His clear understanding, Buddhahood. The Buddha is the highest ideal of compassion and wisdom. As grateful people, we worship and respect to the Buddha in the name of peace of our mind even though he passed away, because he discovered the world reality and pointed out the cessation of suffering to the world kindly. This respect is not beneficial to the Buddha since he further doesn't live physically. However, here we consider the Buddha's enlightenment and his understanding. In addition, the Lord Buddha never hoped a respect from his disciples for his physical body. He said very clearly that if you respect me, you may practice his message.

The Buddha is neither a god nor an incarnation of a god. The Buddha was born in India as an ordinary human being 2600 years ago. At the age of thirty five he gained enlightenment. After that he was not further an ordinary being and he was a supreme human being who, through his own effort, attained to the final bliss of liberation and perfect wisdom and became the peerless teacher of deities and men. Also he encouraged his disciples to see him through practicing his noble message. He says, he who sees Dhamma sees me (*Yo dhammam passati so mam passati*). After 45 years of a great service to the heaven and human world as a Buddha, at the age of eighty, he passed away not to be reborn (*parinirvana*). Even though he passed away, his disciples mention that his teachings are still alive. The Buddha also advised his disciples not to consider this message as a message of a deceased teacher. Until the Buddha's teachings are being practiced by the courageous beings, the Buddha is like living because we can see him through practicing this message.

The Buddha says very clearly that he is not a savior or deliverer and he can rescue nobody, he is only a teacher or guide who preaches the path for liberation all kinds of sufferings. Going on the path is the duty of disciples and followers. However, he always considered the message that he discovered and practiced to the world and encouraged his disciples kindly to overcome suffering as soon as they are able.

The Dhamma :-

The Dhamma, the Buddha's teachings that the Buddha discovered and preached to the world is also concerned as a refuge. The disciples of the Buddha trust in the Buddha's teachings as a real path to overcome suffering. The dhamma that the Buddha delivered is not a doctrine of revelation but the teaching of enlightenment based on the clear comprehension of actuality. Also any courageous

person can practice and see the same result that other enlightened ones gained as his own experience.

There is a very especial thing that even though the Lord Buddha discovered this path himself without any help from others, this message doesn't belong to him either. Whether a Buddha appears or not in the world, this is the world reality and it is in the world forever. When a Buddha appears in the world, he discovers this reality for the first time in this period. If a Buddha doesn't appear, ordinary beings can't understand this reality by their own understanding as this reality is covered by deep ignorance. We respect the Buddha because he realized this world reality for the first time in this period and preached it to men and deities.

The Buddha's all teachings can be included into two levels that the teachings which cause to be born in heaven and human worlds and, the teachings which cause to get rid of suffering and attain final bliss of liberation, enlightenment or *Nirvana*.

When the Lord Buddha preached His teachings, He considered the listeners' intelligence. And He has an order in His speech which is generosity, virtue, renunciation etc. First, The Buddha normally preached the path of reaching heaven and human world, in the next life because someone has the biggest risk in his or her life is the ability to fall into hell. Here, he preached the three meritorious deeds which are the importance of practicing generosity, morality and meditation to overcome rebirth in the hell. When someone practices this path, he or she can gain happiness in this life itself. The Buddha says clearly that practicing merits means gaining happiness. If someone has done a lot of meritorious deeds in his or her life it means he or she has accumulated a lot of happiness in his life. This behavior causes happiness not only hereafter but in this short life itself. When we fulfill these three meritorious deeds, our mind is pure and calm. That pure mind can gain us longevity, good complexion, comfort, strength and finally happiness. When someone always does wholesome acts in his life, deities and departed relatives also bless his life. All of these meritorious deeds cause to be reborn in the heaven or human world developing spirituality on the behalf of real happiness.

The second level of the Buddha's teaching is the path for getting rid of all kinds of sufferings and to overcome *Sansaric* journey. Here the Buddha has pointed out three disciplines which are virtue, concentration (or tranquility) and wisdom. For this path, first we have to be qualified for knowledge about impermanence (*Anicca*) and the dependent origination (*paticca samuppada*). If we have a clear knowledge about arising and ceasing about five aggregates, we are ready to practice this path perseveringly. Here, only knowledge is not enough, but reflection (*Yoniso manasikara*) and practice (*Dhammanudhamma patipatti*) are also important according to the knowledge. When we practice this path, we can see the results as much as we practice. Visible result is the one of the results practicing this teaching.

The Sangha :-

Furthermore, we go to the Sangha for refuge. Sangha means the Buddha's noble disciples who attained and are attaining the levels of enlightenment from mundane level to super mundane level. The Sangha includes not only monks but also nuns and lay persons who attained and are attaining enlightenment. When we go to the Sangha for refuge, our courage and faith increase a lot and, it is a good motivation to fulfill this message. If we know that there are persons who get the results by practicing this message in the world, then we have confidence to go forward with courage to see the results within our life time.

If someone always lives practicing these three refuges in his life, he or she has a lot of things to be happy. Then his or her all other wealth is not valuable like this because he or she has received the most valuable gem in the world. He or she does all activities giving priority to these three things. During the day, a lot of times the memory about three refuges comes to his mind. Negative thoughts and defilements have no chance to come to mind and disturb to the peace of mind. Even though he or she receives the ownership of the whole world, he doesn't care for it. Every moment he lives with supreme happiness reaching final bliss of liberation dealing with the three refuges. And every moment he or she practices the fourfold mindfulness in the name of getting rid of sorrow and lamentation, purification of beings and liberation from all kinds of suffering. Here, his energy to face big challenges such as old age, sickness, death and separation from all interests increases strongly. In front of old age, sickness, death and separation he can live without sorrow and lamentation. Even though we are rich and well educated, we can never face these challenges without suffering except practicing this real path. If we know this path, we are so lucky. If we can reflect on it every moment, we are luckier and, if we can gain complete understanding about the appearing and ceasing in five aggregates (matter, feeling, perception, mental formation and mind) seeing impermanence continuously, we are the luckiest people in the heaven as well as the human world.

To be strong this confidence about the three refuges and to go forward on the path of purification, it is so beneficial to listen to the Buddha's message again and again for the clear knowledge. Here, it is very important to listen to the main doctrines in Buddhism as the Four Noble Truth, The Fourfold Mindfulness, The Dependent Origination, The Three Signs, The Five Spiritual Faculties and The Eightfold Path. More we develop our knowledge, we clear our vision and understanding. It is very useful to go forward on the path of purification seeing the impermanence.

May the Triple Gem Bless You!

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